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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 AMMAN 000571

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ASEC](#) [KMPI](#) [KISL](#) [IS](#) [JO](#)

SUBJECT: INTERIOR MINISTER'S FACE-OFF WITH PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS

REF: A. 04 AMMAN 4629

[B](#). 04 AMMAN 6771

[C](#). 04 AMMAN 8868

[D](#). 04 AMMAN 7619

[E](#). 04 AMMAN 9437

Classified By: CDA David Hale for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Interior Minister Habashneh has locked horns yet again with Jordan's Islamist-heavy professional associations, demanding that they cease all political activity. The associations' leaders, among the most vocal critics of the GOJ's pro-U.S. policies and ties to Israel, are openly defying Habashneh's orders. Determined to show he means business, Habashneh directed security forces to enter the associations' headquarters to remove anti-Israel banners, and separately, to prevent a seminar on Iraq that was expected to evolve into an anti-U.S. rally in support of the insurgents. This latest flare-up is part of the larger struggle underway between Jordan's perceived security needs and its reform priorities. We believe Habashneh is operating on direct orders from the King, who has shown to us increasing impatience with the illegal and unhelpful politicking of the associations. However, this chapter reflects the waning influence of confrontation-adverse Prime Minister Faisal al-Fayez in favor of the tougher line advocated by General Intelligence Director Sa'ad Kheir and Royal Court Minister Samir al-Rifai, who once again are the object of speculation as possible successors to Fayez (septel). End Summary.

HABASHNEH: EITHER YOU'RE WITH US, OR YOU'RE AGAINST US

[1](#)2. (U) Interior Minister Samir Habashneh launched a new salvo against the influential Islamist-dominated professional associations this month, demanding that their leaders end their political activity, which has been punctuated by an active campaign against normalization with Israel and criticism of the U.S. campaign in Iraq. (The associations are vehicles for dissent, in part, because Jordan still lacks effective political parties). During a meeting January 11, Habashneh insisted that by law the associations may pursue their professional agendas only, and must leave politics to the legally registered political parties in Jordan. Habashneh complained that the associations have "exceeded the limits of their specialization and have mobilized themselves to become podiums for all sorts of wild ideas, particularly those that harm the Jordanian state's various components, interests, and relations." He added: "Stopping this intellectual chaos in its tracks is vital to avert the danger of security chaos, which we watch and hear about every day." He gave the associations 24 hours to remove political banners, pictures, and slogans displayed in their headquarters.

[1](#)3. (U) The Professional Associations' Council (PAC), comprised of the heads of the organization's 14 professional unions representing more than 120,000 members ranging from doctors to lawyers to engineers, did not take Habashneh's orders lying down. During the meeting with Habashneh, PAC leaders told the minister that his order was a "big, dangerous and unprecedented transformation of the relationship between the government and the associations," according to press. Insisting on their right as civil society organizations to engage in dialogue on issues vital to the national interest, PAC president Dr. Abd al-Rahim Isa affirmed the organization would continue its "national" activities, and convened an internal meeting to discuss the matter. According to a public statement, PAC members threatened to unanimously resign and hand the keys of the associations' complex to the GOJ in protest against what it described as "martial practices" by the Interior Minister. Some expressed hope that King Abdullah or Prime Minister Fayez would intervene, but Fayez, after publicly endorsing Habashneh's directive, announced on January 18 the postponement of a scheduled meeting with the PAC until after the Eid holiday.

SECURITY FORCES MOVE IN

14. (C) In response to the PAC's defiance, security forces on the night of January 17 entered the professional associations' complex in downtown Amman to remove anti-Israel posters and banners. The police broke the building's locks in order to enter, but there was no violence or arrests. On January 18, Jordanian police surrounded the complex to prevent anyone (including the association heads) from entering the building to attend a seminar on Iraq, which was expected to evolve into an anti-U.S. rally critical of the upcoming Iraqi elections and supportive of the Iraqi insurgents.

15. (U) In response to the GOJ's actions, Bar Association President Hussein Majali told reporters: "Our so-called democracy prevents us from saying no to Bush or Sharon." Head of Jordan's Engineers' Association, Wael al-Saqaa, said: "The government should widen the margin of liberties, not curtail them further." During a meeting on January 19, the PAC decided to sue those who removed the banners and to boycott any further meetings with Habashneh, calling upon the King to intervene and protect the associations' "legitimate rights." The leaders also reiterated their earlier threat to submit a group resignation. Meanwhile, associations' members gathered for Eid prayers in the complex without the Ministry of Interior's objection.

CONFRONTATION A LONG TIME IN COMING

16. (C) The latest crackdown follows a series of GOJ attempts over the last year to rein in the professional associations (as well as their like-minded compatriots in the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamic Action Front), which have long served as focal points for activism against Jordan's peace treaty with Israel and the GOJ's pro-U.S. policies, particularly related to Iraq of late, in the absence of credible or effective political parties. Most of the associations have been dominated by Islamist elements. In May 2004, Habashneh demanded that the PAC's anti-normalization committee, which had revived its practice of blacklisting individuals for allegedly associating with Israel, cease its activities (ref A). However, the GOJ did not back up Habashneh's public threats with action, and the anti-normalizers proceeded unfettered to target MP Ra'ed Qaqish in July for his appearance on al-Hurra opposite an Israeli official (refs B and C). In September, the GOJ cracked down on unlicensed mosque preachers (ref D). In December, the GOJ arrested leading union activist Ali Hattar on charges of slandering the government after delivering a speech highly critical of U.S. policies.

17. (U) Local press has devoted front-page coverage to the conflict all week. Predictably, the IAF's mouthpiece, Arabic weekly al-Sabeel, criticized Habashneh's move, publishing extensive coverage under the heading: "Habashneh Declares War on the Professional Associations." Many papers and columnists have taken the government's side, arguing that the associations would better serve their members and society by focusing on professional development as opposed to political issues. Haydar Rasheed wrote in the Arabic daily al-Arab al-Youm that the professional associations had filled a political vacuum in the absence of effective political parties over the years. He called for true political development in order to fill this void. Several (small) political parties are backing the move as well; a group of 11 (the IAF of course not among them) issued a statement January 19 commending the crackdown.

HABASHNEH FORGETS HIS ROOTS?

18. (C) Even before the latest confrontation, liberal contacts questioned Habashneh's hard-line approach to stifling public discourse on political issues. Journalist Ureib al-Rintawi, who says he knew Habashneh as a "fellow extremist" in the 1970s, noted the irony of Habashneh's tactics, given the fact he had spent time in jail for his political activities. Rintawi speculated that Habashneh has gone down this path because he believes it is the road to success in Jordan's power structure. Habashneh has been rumored to be interested in one day ascending to the Prime Ministry. To former PM Taher al-Masri, the unfortunate result of this "iron fist" policy is to reinforce in front of the public that freedom of expression is expendable. "So what if they talk, complain, or even gather?" Masri asked rhetorically. He believes it is important to provide an outlet for opposing views, even if they criticize the government, because bottled up dissent can manifest itself later in more dangerous ways. Even the most liberal activists, however, maintain that the line should be drawn at anti-normalization activity that targets private citizens or speech that incites violence.

19. (C) Activists worry that this chain of events signals the regime's lack of commitment to political liberalization and reaffirmation of the position of the real power-brokers in Jordan: the security establishment, particularly, General Intelligence Directorate head Sa'ad Kheir. Former royal court adviser Adnan Abu Odeh believes that Habashneh is the expendable "front man" for Kheir. According to Abu Odeh, this move also telegraphs to Jordanians that politics is a dangerous game, best left to the state to dictate. To many, the latest actions just reinforce the widely held perception that political reform is on the back burner (ref E).

COMMENT

10. (C) In fact, Habashneh is almost certainly operating on the basis of direct instructions from the King, who has expressed to us growing impatience with what he would argue is the illegal, unhelpful, and unrepresentative political activism of the associations. In the many decades when political parties other than the Islamic Action Front were banned, the associations naturally became a venue for what were then secular political debate and activity (Islamists have in the past decade come to dominate some of the associations as well). The regime grew to tolerate this development, and far more energy now is devoted in the associations to political grandstanding than to their members' professional concerns. This is a sore point with many members, who must pay dues if they are to practice their professions, but who do not necessarily share the political attitudes of the groups' leaders. Unable to challenge publicly the views of activists on "motherhood" issues, such as opposition to U.S. regional policy, many members just tune them out -- leaving it to one-note radicals to dominate discourse. In theory, Jordan's political development would entail boosting a spectrum of political parties representing a range of political views, not just the default anti-Americanism of the associations. Political thinkers around the King would argue that this will give voice to a stability oriented "silent majority" in the country while turning the associations back into the hands of those with professional concerns.

11. (C) That is a nice theory, but in fact all evidence suggests that the critical views of the association leaders toward the U.S. and Israel resonate among many ordinary Jordanians. The crackdown risks further alienating a public already disenchanted with the GOJ's support for the unpopular U.S. role in the region. Without any public sign of forward movement on reforming electoral and political parties laws to enable broader political representation in parliament and greater activism, a crackdown now on the associations hands the regime's critics the ingredients needed to challenge the government's commitment to true political reform. However, this step reflects a genuine fear in senior regime circles that even modest anti-U.S. demonstrations could have a snowball effect, triggering larger demonstrations and stronger calls for policy shifts. With the conflict-adverse Prime Minister's efforts to engage in dialogue with the opposition discredited, and a cabinet apparently stymied by parliament, voices advocating a tougher line, such as GID Chief Kheir and Royal Court Minister Rifai, are prevailing with the King. And these figures are once again the object of speculation as successors to the PM (septel).

12. (U) Baghdad minimize considered.

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